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ABSTRACT

A survey questionnaire on aspects of the job that contributed to burnout received responses from 128 school-based administrators and 635 teachers in a large Western Canadian urban school district. Subjects identified work conditions which contributed to feelings of overextension and exhaustion, to negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and to a lack of personal accomplishment. These feelings and attitudes were representative of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment burnout as defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981). Feelings of overextension and exhaustion were related to a heavy work load, insufficient time, and expectations of the Central Office. Negative attitudes and impersonal responses toward clients were associated with interactions with students, colleagues, and superordinates, negative public opinion, and poor feedback. Feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment were related to poor feedback, interactions with students, a demoralized self-concept, poor advancement opportunities, and negative public and parental attitudes. (Author/JD)

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THE STRESS STORIES OF SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

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ABSTRACT

Teachers and school-based administrators identified work conditions which contributed to feelings of overextension and exhaustion, to negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and to a lack of personal accomplishment. These feelings and attitudes were representative of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment burnout as defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981a). Feelings of overextension and exhaustion were related to a heavy work load, insufficient time, and expectations by Central Office. Negative attitudes and impersonal responses towards clients were associated with interactions with students, colleagues, and superordinates, negative public opinion, and poor feedback. Feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment were related to poor feedback, interactions with students, a demoralized self-concept, poor advancement opportunities, and negative public and parental attitudes.

THE STRESS STORIES OF SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Research on burnout in education has been a recent phenomenon (e.g., Anderson and Iwanicki, 1984; Blase, 1982; Cedoline, 1982; Conway, 1984; Farber, 1984a,b; Gmelch, 1983; Iwanicki, 1983; Meléndez and de Guzmán, 1983; Rathbone and Benedict, 1980; Ratsoy and Friesen, 1985; Schwab, 1981; Schwab and Iwanicki, 1982a,b). Many of these studies deal with the teacher's experiences of work stress and/or burnout. Both qualitative, ethnographic methodologies (e.g., Blase, 1982; Rathbone and Benedict, 1980) and quantitative techniques (e.g., Anderson and Iwanicki, 1984; Schwab, 1981) have been used to gather data on burnout. However, many studies have not fully explored what teachers and school administrators themselves perceive as major causes of feelings and attitudes associated with burnout.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to extract meaning from the comments of teachers and school-based administrators, and to make sense of the work conditions contributing most to feelings of overextension and exhaustion, to the development of negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and to feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment among the respondents. Further, the comments of teachers and administrators related to each work situation identified by them were examined to add further insights into the concept of burnout proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1981a,b).

Conceptual Design

Burnout is a difficult concept to define. Maslach (1982b) claimed burnout "can be considered one type of job stress" (p.3), and Farber (1984b) defined it "as the final step in a progression to cope with negative stress conditions" (p.324). Generally however, burnout may be conceptualized as a maladaptive coping mechanism to conditions of work which are stressful and demanding, or lacking in sufficient challenge and recognition (e.g., Cherniss, 1980a,b; Freudenberger, 1974, 1977; Freudenberger and Richelson, 1980; Maslach, 1976; Pines, 1981; Pines, Aronson and Kafry, 1981; Veninga and Spradley, 1981; Welch, Medeiros and Tate, 1982). This maladaptive coping is far from therapeutic as some forms of stress may be, and is almost always debilitating and prolonged. Whatever the cause, there appears little dissension that burnout has deleterious effects on both the individual and the organization. Identifying work conditions and dispositional characteristics contributing to burnout may provide information needed to alleviate the damaging impact of burnout among employees and the organizations in which they work.

A recent and widely accepted conceptualization of burnout is that provided by Maslach and Jackson (1981a), who defined the syndrome as "a continuous variable, ranging from low to moderate to high degrees of experienced feeling" (p.1). These degrees of feeling are represented by the three sub-scales of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment burnout as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981a,b). Emotional Exhaustion burnout refers to feelings of overextension and exhaustion caused by daily work

pressures. Depersonalization burnout manifests itself in negative attitudes and impersonal responses towards the people with whom one works. Personal Accomplishment burnout refers to a tendency to denigrate one's achievements at work, and to foster a poor self-image.

Research based on the MBI has been extensive (e.g., Anderson and Iwanicki, 1984; Brookings, Bolton, Brown and McEvoy, 1985; Iwanicki and Schwab, 1981; Jayaratne and Chess, 1983; MacPherson, 1985; Ratsoy and Friesen, 1985; Schwab and Iwanicki, 1982a). However, because the MBI measures a concept of burnout based on the experiences of helping service professionals and the everyday emotional arousal of their 'people work,' Blase (1982) suggested that "critical dimensions of [the burnout] phenomenon may have been missed" (p.94). Some of these dimensions may be uncovered by including more relevant data from educators in further formulation and research on burnout.

Consequently, the data presented in this paper represent the feelings and attitudes of teachers and school-based administrators who described work situations which, according to them, contributed to feelings of overextension and exhaustion, encouraged the development of negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and led to feelings of a lack of personal achievement. These data were deemed representative of burnout as defined by Maslach (1978a,b; 1982a,b,c) and Maslach and Jackson (1981a,b). The degree of burnout was not the crucial issue. The major focus of the study was to extract meaning from the comments by teachers and administrators and to make sense of their work-related experiences. Thus, the data provide evidence for a more complete insight into aspects of the job which contribute to feelings and attitudes representative of burnout among school-based personnel. This

evidence provides for a more contextual concept of burnout than that presently existing for the general field of the helping service professional.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 128 school-based administrators (principals and assistant principals), and 635 teachers in a large Western Canadian urban separate school district. Of the total 763 respondents, fifty-eight percent were females. The average number of years as an educator for teachers was 13.5 years; for administrators, it was 21.1 years.

Procedures

A survey questionnaire which incorporated an open-ended response section was mailed to all teachers and school-based administrators in the survey district. Respondents were asked to identify two aspects of the job which contributed most to: (1) feelings of overextension and exhaustion, (2) the development of negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and (3) feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment. The three open-ended questions were derived from the work of Maslach and Jackson (1981a,b), who defined burnout as a continuous variable consisting of feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment.

Analysis

A content analysis was made of each response by teachers and school administrators. Orlich (1978) contended that the most critical problem of open-ended responses "is to tabulate the information in a meaningful, systematic, and objective manner" (p.47). In order to achieve these objectives,

all open-ended responses were coded by the researcher as well as by an independent coder. By this means, it was hoped to preserve objectivity while strengthening researcher reliability. The inter-rater reliability was measured based upon suggestions by Goodwin and Goodwin (1985, p.7). The inter-rater reliability coefficients for coding of open-ended responses were as follows:

1. Feelings of overextension and exhaustion -- .88;
2. Negative attitudes and impersonal responses -- .83; and
3. Feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment -- .86.

These feelings and attitudes became a priori major analysis categories. A posteriori sub-categories were generated by the researcher and the independent coder. The method used for content analysis of the open-ended responses was similar to that described by Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p.165-169). Briefly, each response by teachers and administrators was coded according to the a posteriori sub-categories. After coding, copies were made of the original responses. Each coded response was then cut from the original and filed in identically-coded manila folders. A batch of folders was assigned to data from teachers, another to data from administrators. Thus, any particular manila folder contained all comments, descriptions, and insights by teachers or administrators related to their experiences of work conditions contributing to feelings of overextension and exhaustion, to the development of negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and to feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment.

Findings

In this section are included the pertinent comments by teachers and school-based administrators related to their feelings of overextension and exhaustion, to the development of negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and to feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment.

Feelings of Overextension and Exhaustion

The major contributing factor to feelings of overextension and exhaustion, according to the respondents, was a heavy work load. For instance, a male junior-high teacher (22 years of experience) wrote of "the 'go-go-go' type of schedule" in schools.

A male elementary teacher (16 years of experience):

> The pace that one has to set to keep up with curriculum activities and students in order to do a good job is exhausting.

A male elementary principal (34 years):

> Working in an environment where everything should have been completed 'yesterday.' The paper 'blizzard.'

A female junior-elementary teacher (35 years):

> I believe that the present expectations [of] teachers [are] out of step with reality . . . One needs at least 50 hours of class preparation to do an excellent job. This has never been possible. The work load of teachers is truly unreasonable if excellent results are required.

The constraints of time contributed to feelings of overextension and exhaustion. A male senior-high teacher (11 years) found the constant demand to meet deadlines left "not enough time to revitalize."

A female elementary teacher (8 years):

> A shortage of time. I get to school early and leave late and still do not have enough time to do all the necessary preparation and checking.

Policies and directives from Central Office caused concern.

A male senior-high teacher (27 years):

> Expectations of some 'head office' people. I feel many have forgotten the daily demands of the classroom teacher.

A male elementary principal (16 years):

> Failure of senior administrators, central office administrators to truly understand the complexities of the classroom. They are removed!

The "pressure cooker" situation of administration contributed to exhaustion for a male junior-elementary principal (18 years). Other contributors were the "constant bombardment of people" (a male senior-high assistant principal, 16 years), and having to "deal with . . . conflict honestly and fairly" (a male elementary principal, 25 years).

Teachers wrote of the constant interactions with students as leading to overextension and exhaustion.

A female senior-high teacher (4 years):

> Students who cause many disturbances in class. I have to work hard to keep on top of them.

Poor interpersonal relationships with colleagues contributed to exhaustion.

A male senior-high teacher (2 years):

> The continual personal contact day in day out with so many people seems to exhaust me.

These data reveal that according to the respondents, a heavy work load, limited time, the policies and directives of higher administration, and interpersonal relationships were major contributors to feelings of overextension and exhaustion for both teachers and administrators. These feelings are similar in content to Emotional Exhaustion burnout, defined by Maslach (1982b) as "a pattern of emotional overload . . . [where] people feel drained and used

up. They lack energy to face another day." Trying to keep pace with increasing demands without the benefit of extra time to satisfy these demands was a constant source of frustration among educators, and a major contributor to exhaustion. Far from being therapeutic and a source of motivation, work load added to the burden of teaching and administration, and exacerbated underlying tensions. Interpersonal relationships with colleagues, and interactions with students on a professional basis, contributed to work load, and created unique conflict situations.

Negative Attitudes and Impersonal Responses

Having to contend with intransigent and unmotivated students caused many teachers and administrators concern, and contributed to their negative attitudes and impersonal responses. A female junior-elementary teacher (24 years) wrote that "negative, rude and unmotivated 'clients' turn me off very quickly."

A male senior-high teacher (18 years):

> Some students appear not to care and have not developed [proper] work habits and attitudes. If they don't care I find it hard to care for them.

A male junior-high principal (20 years) mentioned that "students do not show respect . . . It must be constantly impressed upon them."

Chapman (1983, p.40) referred to the increasing negative public opinion of education and educators. This negativism contributed to reciprocal responses among the respondents.

A male elementary principal (26 years):

> There is only so much a teacher can do because of the kind of values and attitudes that pervade a selfish society. Indifference of many parents.

A female junior-elementary teacher (11 years):

> Lack of parental support . . . if parents don't care enough to make sure homework is done after repeated phone calls, detentions, etc., it becomes easier to think if they don't care, why should I?

Conflict situations caused by differences in perspectives among teachers and administrators, combined with negative feedback, hastened the development of cynicism and negativism. A male junior-high principal (34 years) wrote of a "conflict in philosophies, laggardness, inappropriate and unbecoming behaviors [of teachers as] professionals."

A female elementary teacher (19 years):

> Lack of interest in me personally or in my work in the classroom from fellow teachers.

A male elementary principal (24 years) mentioned a lack of positive reinforcement when things go right, "you only hear from people when things go wrong."

When teachers and administrators believed their professional interactions with students, colleagues, parents, and various publics were often unappreciated and almost always criticized, they developed reciprocal negative attitudes and impersonal responses. The constant battle to maintain commitment to a job lacking in sufficient positive feedback and recognition led to feelings of disillusionment and cynicism in many of the respondents. These responses by educators to work conditions they perceived as negative in orientation are indicative of Depersonalization burnout. Maslach and Jackson (1981a) defined this form of burnout as "the development of negative, cynical attitudes and feelings about one's clients" (p.1). Maslach and Pines (1977) referred to depersonalization as "a very cynical and dehumanized perception of [clients] . . . in which they are labeled in derogatory ways

and treated accordingly" (p.101).

The data suggest that both teachers and administrators work under stressful conditions which often lead to interpersonal conflicts, and a sense of meaninglessness in educators. Receiving increasing criticism from the public sector, and little positive feedback from colleagues and parents, merely added to the stresses associated with teaching and administration. One form of coping with this barrage of criticism and lack of feedback was to develop negative attitudes and impersonal responses as protection against further disappointment and attack.

Feelings of a Lack of Personal Accomplishment

When teachers and administrators believed their work was not appreciated by others, a poor self-image and a loss of faith in personal achievement resulted.

A female junior-elementary teacher (7 years):

> Very little feedback from administrators and students (expected?) . . . and [little] parent involvement . . . need to hear that I make a difference. No reward for extra time and energy compared to those who do the bare minimum. Why bother?

A male junior-high assistant principal (10 years) was frustrated by "no -- none -- never any positive individual feedback!"

Often the interactions with students were discouraging. This discouragement manifested itself in a demoralized sense of professional achievement.

A male senior-high teacher (2 years):

> When students do poorly on exams I tend to blame myself or my teaching abilities.

A male junior-high assistant principal (15 years):

> Frustration at being unable to provide enough help to students who need it.

Both teachers and administrators experienced a deflated sense of personal accomplishment because of the restrictions of systemic policies. Limited opportunities for promotion contributed to this concern with accomplishment. A male elementary principal (25 years) mentioned he didn't "have too much input into major educational decisions . . . when it counts."

A male junior-high teacher (16 years):

> Promotional methods in this system do not recognize quality of teaching or needs and interests of staff.

The demands and expectations of parents and the public were considered unreasonable because of their manner of presentation and their substantive content. These demands and expectations led some educators to question their self-image and the importance of their work roles.

A male senior-high teacher (12 years):

> It seems that the media (newspapers in particular), the public (everyone is an expert it seems), the Department of Education (government), are constantly telling us what a terrible job we are doing. I do my best, but I'm starting to believe them!

These data indicate that feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment in educators were associated with the lack of positive feedback from clients, colleagues, superordinates, and the general public. Other work situations contributing to a poor sense of achievement were interactions with students on a professional basis, rigid systemic policies, and few opportunities for advancement. The data indicate a growing concern for status and recognition many teachers and administrators believed were missing from their jobs. The comments also suggest that the respondents felt they were being taken for

granted by higher administration as well as by peers, parents, and various publics. A consequence of this public image of insignificance was a poor self-image. This response is indicative of Personal Accomplishment burnout, defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981a) as "the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, particularly with regard to one's work with clients" (p.1).

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to extract meaning from the comments of teachers and school-based administrators, and to make sense of their work-related experiences. These work-related experiences were categorized by the extent to which they led to feelings of overextension and exhaustion, to the development of negative attitudes and impersonal responses, and to feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment. The comments by the respondents were examined as possible indicators of burnout as defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981a,b), and as representative of each category of feelings and attitudes as listed above.

Respondents' comments indicated that feelings of overextension and exhaustion were associated with the work conditions of a heavy work load, time constraints, interactions with students and peers, and the unrelenting expectations of higher administration to complete more tasks with each successive school year. These findings provide evidence for Maslach's (1982b) claim that burnout-prone situations are those where "too much information is pouring in, too many demands are being made, and it is all occurring too fast for the person to keep up with it" (p.38). The data suggest that work load had deleterious effects on the work effectiveness of teachers and administrators by robbing them of vital reserves of physical and emotional energy. Without the time needed to "revitalize" these sagging

energy reserves, many educators overextended themselves, thereby exacerbating their feelings of exhaustion. Further research may explore whether work conditions contributing to feelings of overextension and exhaustion are cumulative in nature, or are seasonal are therefore predictable. If work load is greater at the beginning and at the end of the school year, specific preventative measures could be taken to alleviate this burden on teachers and school administrators. Some work conditions are unique to the school setting, such as the interactions with students. A shared work load and a more equitable distribution of class allotments may assist educators in coping with these special demands.

Feeling powerless to control or to alter the situation, and therefore having to exist with it, led to the development of negative attitudes and impersonal responses in the respondents. For teachers in particular, having to contend with rude, unmotivated, and sometimes emotionally disturbed children who responded in an uncaring fashion, promoted the development of negative attitudes. These responses reflect the depersonalization response to demanding work conditions identified by Maslach and Jackson (1981a, p.1), and Freudenberger (1977). Freudenberger (1977) stated that burnout as a consequence of staff-client interactions "includes such symptoms as cynicism and negativism and a tendency to be inflexible and almost rigid in thinking" (p.90).

In some instances, both teachers and administrators appeared to develop "intrapsychic psychological defenses" against job stressors. Cherniss (1980b, p.47) referred to these defenses as the actions of withdrawal, detachment, avoidance, lowering of goals, and blaming others. Rather than suffer from guilt and frustration because of their perceived inability to alter and successfully cope with stressful work conditions, some respondents

withdrew from the situation, or rationalized the predicament by blaming others. According to Cherniss (1980b, p.19), both withdrawal and blame are characteristic burnout responses to stressful and aggravating conditions at work. The findings of this study support the assertion by Maslach (1982b) that because of the limited focus by service professionals on the needs and demands of clients, "it is not surprising that professional helpers begin to develop a negative and cynical view of human nature" (p.19). An underlying problem is that the maladaptive coping patterns of Depersonalization burnout exhibited by teachers and administrators ultimately may have adverse and lasting effects on the schools in which they work. Negative attitudes and impersonal responses may become a canker difficult to heal, and even more difficult to remove. Making educators aware of work conditions contributing to their impersonal and cynical responses is a fundamental hurdle to improving staff-client interactions.

Feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment were related to insufficient positive feedback, poor interactions with students and parents, a demoralized self-concept, and the unrealistic expectations (according to the respondents) of higher administration. Of chief concern was the lack of sufficient positive reinforcement and its adverse effect on self-esteem. A person's self-concept is enhanced by positive feedback. Negative feedback bolsters feelings of incompetence and failure and contributes to burnout. Maslach (1982b) identified the "almost exclusively negative [feedback]" (p.19) of the helping professions as a major contributor to frustration, disenchantment, and burnout. Pines (1981) mentioned that "feedback about work provides individuals with information about their levels of performance and success and is crucial for their sense of meaningfulness and achievement at work" (p.204). Receiving inadequate or no feedback was a substantial contributor

to feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment among the respondents.

This loss of faith in personal accomplishment may be a subjective psychological response to conditions of work which are perceived as unstimulating, unrewarding, and which offer little recognition. In comparison, feelings of exhaustion and depersonalization are more likely to occur because of demanding work situations associated with incessant helper-client contacts. These assertions reflect the notion proposed by Brookings et al. (1985) that "personal accomplishment is largely independent of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization" (p.149). Further research may explore whether feelings of a lack of personal accomplishment symptomatic of Personal Accomplishment burnout are indeed indicators of burnout, or are instead more representative of job satisfaction and motivation. The data indicate that satisfaction with status and recognition is implicated in the development of a lack of personal accomplishment. Future research may explore this relationship between job satisfaction and personal accomplishment.

Results of this study suggest that certain aspects of the job setting for teachers and school-based administrators contribute to feelings and attitudes associated with burnout as defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981a,b). Whether these feelings and attitudes are representative of other work settings is a matter for further research. Identifying those responses specific to the work roles of teachers and administrators may promote more empathetic responses in parents, publics, and system-wide administrators to the special needs of teachers and school-based administrators. As the data reveal, the obvious effects of stressful work conditions for educators are a deterioration in physical well-being, exhaustion, illness, psychological detachment, a demoralized

sense of personal accomplishment, and emotional ennui.

As a final observation: the definition of burnout used in this stud is limited both by its theoretical base and its research methodology. A longitudinal study employing a triangulation of research methodologies may assist researchers in uncovering other work factors implicated in the development of feelings and attitudes associated with burnout. This research would provide information needed to enhance the job design of educators, and so mitigate their propensity to burn out.

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